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ABSTRACT

To what extent can school principals provide effective educational leadership? Research shows that, contrary to textbook images, principals react to their circumstances instead of controlling them and that they spend most of their time on administrative, not instructional, matters. Further entrenching principals in their administrative role is the fact that the principalship is legitimized more by its position in a bureaucratic hierarchy than by any instructional expertise on the part of the principal. However, principals could base their legitimacy on instructional expertise. To do so they must take a more active role in instruction; recent research, for instance, shows that effective schools' principals are more active in instructional supervision, evaluation, and leadership. A redefinition of the principal's role will mean that principals must acquire new skills and practice closer overseeing and improvement of instruction. This instructional supervision must be based on three points: the classroom should be the focus of activity, teachers' and pupils' concerns must take priority, and principals should give teachers objective feedback on their classroom work. (Author/RW)

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THE AUSTRALIAN ADMINISTRATOR

A Professional Publication for Educational Administrators

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

Published bi-monthly, February to December

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One of the declared purposes of The Australian Administrator is to provide a forum for the informed discussion of matters which focus upon the administration of schools. Accordingly, this first issue opens up the controversial topic of the rightful role of the school principal.

If this first issue generates some heat, then well and good! It may well be only after the generation of the white heat of intellectual turmoil that we are able to see light at the end of the tunnel, on matters such as this one. (Ed.).

THE PRINCIPAL AS AN EDUCATIONAL LEADER: TO BE, OR NOT TO BE?

W. John Smyth

INTRODUCTION

If the principals of Australia's 9,444 government and non-government primary and secondary schools were to mysteriously disappear while returning from a national conference, what would be the costs? Obviously there are no simple answers. To the bereaved families, the grief and hardship would be considerable if not immense, and the *social* costs would be high. But what of the *educational* costs to the nation, the schools and our young people in terms of quality of education? Would the blow be so severe as to close schools for a protracted period? Would the loss seriously and permanently rupture the fabric of Australian life? Alternatively, would schools suffer the inconvenience, adjust to the modification of their staffing schedules and conduct "business as usual"?

This daunting, if hypothetical, scenario is worth consideration in looking at the contemporary role of the school principal in the education of our young. At the outset, it should be noted that the issue of leadership in schools is not raised here with a view to disparaging existing practises; rather, the purpose is to provide constructive criticism for the ultimate improvement of teaching and learning.

The basic question being addressed in this paper is a significant one: to what extent does the principal of a school provide educational leadership that has a discernible impact on the learning of pupils? The title of this paper suggests that some doubt exists on this matter. It shall be argued here that many schools are in need of "educational" leadership that relates directly to the instructional and teaching function of schools. Arguments to the contrary by principals, based on claims of alleged lack of time or inadequate expertise, in many instances amount to rationalisations and admissions by principals that they have forgotten the primary purpose for which schools exist, namely, to enhance pupil learning.

The remainder of this paper will look briefly at some of the research that has sought to establish what is the current role of the school principal; the need for a more enlightened form of educational leadership; a possible re-definition of the principal's role; and an approach that might be useful.

THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE

The traditional literature in educational administration adopts a hortative or prescriptive approach

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to the role of the school principal. The analogy is frequently drawn between the manager of an industrial concern, and the principal of a school. Accordingly, the principal is urged to concern himself with such management activities as planning, co-ordinating, directing, controlling, communicating and evaluating, all of course within a suitable human relations context.

Placing aside for the moment the similarities and differences between industrial and educational organisations, close critical analyses have revealed that neither managers (Mintzberg, 1975) nor principals (Wolcott, 1973), engage extensively in the logical prescriptions set down in the advocacy literature.

What principals *actually* do is noticeably at variance with claims as to what they should do! Observational research studies (Wolcott, 1973; O'Dempsey, 1976; Peterson, 1977) have found principals engage in activities of extremely short duration, that are highly varied in nature, and which change with great rapidity during the course of a day. For a large portion of the time the principal responds to contacts initiated by others, has relatively little "free" time, and strategically, the principal operates close to the administrative centre of the school, handling problems and crises that are brought forward. Particularly noticeable in the research studies is any extensive involvement by principals in the technical core activity of the school – namely, teaching and learning in classrooms. Even teaching principals were found (O'Dempsey, 1976) to be pre-occupied with "administrative pathologies" – the mundane, the repetitive and the trivial, as well as tasks which nobody else would accept. Grassie's (1978) national study of 220 principals found that running the school smoothly and efficiently was the main duty imposed on principals by bureaucratised Education Departments, and was the main service principals saw themselves as providing to students and staff.

The reality of the principal's role is determined not only by the perceptions and expectations of others and by what the principal actually does in the job, but also by personal views held as to the nature of the work process itself. Mintzberg (1975) found the effectiveness of the manager in industry was substantially influenced by his insight into his own work. Performance depended to a large extent on how well the manager understood and responded to the pressures and dilemmas of the job. Managers who were able to be introspective about their work with a clear sense of organisational purpose were more likely to be effective at their jobs. We might suggest likewise for school principals!

An interesting and novel perspective on the principalship is presented by Wake (1979), who advances two reasons for the functional existence of "the office" (in the bricks and mortar sense) within the school. Firstly, for conducting private interviews, and secondly for undertaking administrative tasks without frequent interruptions. Wake suggests that the reverse may equally be true – the principal's administrative duties might be a consequence of his having a private office with clerical and support facilities. Provision of individual offices and secretaries to all teachers would certainly reduce the administrative tasks of the principal as teachers undertook these tasks themselves. Functional reasons aside, the other purpose of the principalship within the school is ascribed by Wake to a "symbolic expression of an invisible social hierarchy" (p. 15), imposed from outside, in which the principal is located at the top. Accordingly, he concludes: *The meaning of the principal's role in the school is thus centered around his occupancy of the office; his authority is derived from the occupancy of that office rather than from the authority of superior knowledge or even indispensable function. Principals are indispensable only in a formal hierarchic organisation. (p. 15)*

Central to the issue of the principal's role is the source of his/her authority. Contrary to conventional wisdom, it is no longer fashionable to envisage authority as "coming down from above". Rather, it depends on how orders and communications are perceived by others. Authority only really exists where individuals are prepared to accept that another has the right to influence their behaviour in some fashion.

In the search for an acceptable authority base for leadership by principals, French and Raven's (1959) five sources of power are useful.
Reward power they describe as the capacity to provide positive tangible reinforcement for acceptable follower behaviour; *co-ercive* power, refers to the ability to inflict negative or punitive sanctions; *legitimate* power derives from legislative enactments; *expert* power is based on the possession and demonstration of special skills and knowledge. As applied to schools, legitimate and expert power are the most salient.

Legitimate power within a school attaches to the formal bureaucratic structure of the school. It ranges from government proclamations and orders, through to the local rules and regulations of the individual school. This represents the legal authority of the school, and of the principal in particular, to act on certain matters. Expert power, on the other hand, derives from the individual teaching and administrative skills and expertise

of the principal. Authority in this instance derives from specialist knowledge based on training, which the principal brings to the situation. It is the co-existence of these two forms of authority within schools that leads to an uneasy coalition.

A MORE ENLIGHTENED SENSE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Authority and autonomy in decision making lie at the centre of the controversy over the role of the principal. Survey research indicates a preparedness by teachers to allow principals to act on their behalf in matters of resource acquisition and handling, as well as in public relations and in dealings with the community, the council and the Department. What is much less clear is the willingness of teachers to readily accept incursions by the principal into activities requiring specific expertise in teaching and classroom matters. At the same time, principals are being urged (Weldy, 1979) to take a *more* active role in the instructional aspect of the school. Paradoxically, it is also being claimed (Fallon, 1979) that this is beyond the capacity of the principal to perform.

Leaving aside the rhetoric, Goodlad (1978) comes close to the heart of the matter in his assertion that educational administrators generally seem to have lost a sense of what their profession is about: "In education, it is a long time since we paid homage to the essence of our profession" (p. 322). He was referring particularly to an excessive concern with matters *administrative*, rather than issues *educational*. This tide, according to Goodlad, appears to be turning: *Many educational administrators - in rapidly growing numbers - want to put education at the centre again, want to become educational leaders again, not mere managers. (p. 324)*

Scholars in educational administration in the past have either been oblivious to the possibility of any relationship between the activities of the principal and pupil learning, or completely daunted by the multiplicity of intervening variables constituting causal networks. Despite the awesome nature of the task, research is beginning to proceed in this area. A study by Wellisch, MacQueen, Carriere and Duck (1978) designed to trace the possible effects of principal behaviour on pupil learning, found gains in pupil achievement in schools where principals: (a) felt strongly about instruction; (b) communicated their views on instruction to teachers; (c) took responsibility for co-ordinating instruction, and (d) regularly reviewed and discussed teaching in their schools with teachers. Observational studies are beginning to provide additional support, as well.

This research, albeit limited, is important because it substantiates the long-held intuitive belief of many practitioners that the principal should not only be a highly competent teacher able to demonstrate this expertise to teachers, but that he/she should also be actively involved in assisting teachers to modify the curriculum to better suit the needs of children. Claims of inadequate time to exercise instructional leadership have been described by Fallon (1979) as a comfortable excuse by principals "to avoid one of the toughest jobs in the world: assessing teaching learning situations and suggesting ways of improving them" (p. 68). At least one principal (Weldy, 1979) made his own position clear: "Principals must furnish instructional leadership whether they want to or not. If they don't know how, they must learn. If they don't have time, they must find time" (p. 72).

As a precursor to the required change in role of many principals, perhaps we need to follow Grassie's (1979) suggestion of changing the basis of the analogy we use to examine the principalship. Maybe we have done the school principal a grave disservice by likening the role to that of a manager in industry. Instead, we should be drawing a parallel with the front-line supervisor in industry who is "highly skilled in the process he is supervising" (p. 6). By emphasising the skills of teacher supervision and evaluation (in its helping sense) we may be able to change the role of principals from that of "odd-job men doing the host of maintenance tasks any organisation throws up" (p. 6).

TOWARDS A CHANGE OF ROLE

As this paper has suggested, there is a need to carefully re-examine the current role of the school principal. It was not the intention of this paper to provide prescriptive answers to this pressing educational problem. Nevertheless, if significant, meaningful and lasting changes are to be made so that the professional lives of principals are made more rewarding and schools better places of learning, then clear directives will need to be forthcoming on how to effect these changes.

Any suggestion of a large-scale return of principals to *actual* classroom teaching, is obviously out of the question. Likewise, the proposition that principals become instant curriculum experts, or consultants thoroughly conversant with the confusing body of findings on research on teaching, are equally implausible. Rather, what is required is something which is both more comprehensive *and* more subtle!

To qualify for the title of *educational leader* the school principal of the future will need to concentrate on acquiring new skills and orientations.

While having one eye firmly fixed on the expectations and needs of the wider community, a principal deserving of the title of leader will have to have the other eye just as firmly fixed on the teaching, instructional and pedagogical aspects of the school. This will necessitate much closer supervision and evaluation of teachers and programs, in a constructive and helping context, than has been customary in the past. As a guide, three factors should be paramount in whatever scheme is proposed for use by principals in helping teachers to improve instruction. Firstly, the classroom should be the arena or focus for any activity; secondly, the concerns and issues of importance to teachers and pupils should feature prominently; and finally, the teacher should be provided with objective feedback as to the quality of his/her classroom performance. While not guaranteeing instant success, if adopted these guidelines have the ingredients for establishing a basis upon which the principal can begin to establish and assert a position of true professional leadership in the school (Smyth, 1980).

CONCLUSION

This paper began with a rhetorical question that emerged from a hypothetical scenario: can the school principal provide educational leadership of a kind that matters?

The analogy of the principal as a "manager" engaging in rational prescriptive procedures, was rejected in favour of research which portrayed the principal as a *reactor* to, rather than a *controller* of, the circumstance in which he/she was embedded. The bureaucratic means by which the office was derived was suggested as contributing to a further entrenchment in that role. Rather than authority being derived from expertise, it was seen to be rooted in a form of legitimacy bestowed by bureaucratic mentors.

The key to the lost cause of leadership in schools was envisaged as lying in matters educational rather than administrative. Limited research supports the intuitive view that pupils attain higher levels of achievement in schools where the principal is more involved, and is seen to be more concerned with, the instructional program of the school. Perhaps we should begin to think of the principal *less* in terms of a "manager" and *more* in terms of a "supervisor" armed with a definitive body of expertise and skills in classroom analysis, equipped and able to help in the improvement of teaching and learning. The answer to the question implied in the Shakespearian sub-title to this paper is that principals *can* provide a style of educational leadership that makes a difference in schools.

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